

## The Difference between Record offices and Register Offices

The function of the County Record Offices (*hereafter* CROs), which are provided by the County Council's Archives Service, is to preserve historical records relating to the Cambridgeshire, regardless of date or medium, and to make them available for public use. This service is enhanced by making available copies of records elsewhere and indexes to them. The function of the Register Offices, which are part of the national Registration Service, administered in Cambridgeshire by the County Council, is to provide a legal registry of births, marriages and deaths; to this end it provides, for a charge, official copies (certificates) of register entries recorded by the Registration Service since 1837. Such certificates may be required for legal purposes, but they may also be of value for biographical or genealogical research. Information contained within the records held by the CROs overlaps with that held by the Register Offices and some records held by the two services are linked.

### Birth and Baptism

Information contained in the registers of births in the Register Offices is also contained in the registers of baptisms kept by churches and deposited in the CROs. There are however important differences in detail and coverage: until the 20th century it was unusual to record the date of birth in registers of baptism or to include the mother's maiden name, which are both given in the register of births. Whilst most people until modern times were baptised as babies, many were not, due to their parents' religious beliefs (notably Baptists practising adult baptism) or neglect. In contrast, few births were not recorded by the Registrar after about 1850. Baptisms are recorded in the register of the church where the baptism took place, but this may not be in the parish where the birth took place, and there may be more than one church in that parish where a child may have been baptised. However, births are always recorded in the register of the district or sub-district where the birth took place. Church registers of baptism of recent times may not be deposited in the CROs, either because the church has merely chosen to retain it or it is still in use. Some small, especially rural, parishes may still be using registers begun in the mid-19th century.

## **Marriage in Parish Churches**

Since 1837 marriages that take place in parish churches (i.e. of the Church of England or Anglican churches), until recently the most common place of marriage, have been recorded in duplicate registers issued by the Registration Service. The clergyman who is responsible for entering the registers makes a quarterly copy of the entries for the registrar who until recent times forwarded it to the General Register Office. When the registers are filled up, they are returned to the local register office and one is kept by it; the other is returned to the church, which may decide to deposit it in the record office, usually a few years later when the need to check recent entries has diminished. Consequently, until a register is completed and surrendered the local register offices will have no information on marriages in a particular church except for the most recent (as the quarterly returns are now kept by the local register office and forwarded electronically). The original register will not be in the record office either, though (importantly) it may have a microfilm or transcribed copy. Even if a marriage register is completed, a church may chose to retain it if it wishes.

## **Marriage in non-Anglican churches and Register Offices**

Since 1837 it has been possible for legal marriages to take place in non-Anglican places of worship as well as by a civil ceremony in a register office (and since quite recently in other authorised places). Since 1898 many non-Anglican churches have been able to follow a similar procedure with duplicate registers, one register when it is closed being surrendered to the register and the other retained and then often deposited in a record office; but for marriages in non-Anglican churches before 1898 and for all marriages in register offices the only original record of the marriage itself will be that kept by the Registration Service.

## **Death and Burial**

As with births and baptisms, information given in the registers of deaths maintained by the Registration Service is more extensive and different from that given in the registers of burials for parish churchyards or for cemeteries administered by local authorities, which may be deposited in the record office if the book is completed. It is less likely, however, that the dates will be far apart. Death will be recorded in the district or sub-district in which the death took place, which may not be easily assumed for a sudden death; similarly, many factors determine someone's final resting place, which is consequently often not the churchyard of the parish in which spent their final years. Church registers of burial of recent times may not be deposited in the CROs, either because the church has merely chosen to retain it or it is still in use. Some small, especially rural, parishes may still be using registers begun in the mid-19th century.

## **Area for which information is available**

The Registration Service nowadays is based on the county, but the districts into which it is divided, with offices in Cambridgeshire at Cambridge, Ely, Wisbech and Huntingdon, derive from the framework of the Victorian poor law, of 'unions' of parishes centred on a market town that often crossed county boundaries; consequently, older records of births in several outlying areas of the county may be found in offices in adjacent counties. The CROs' role and area of responsibility for church records is based on different criteria, mainly the organization of the Established Church; so original records for anywhere in the county may for various reasons not be deposited and for different outlying areas may similarly be held by record offices in adjacent counties, as well as by the Wisbech Museum. This limitation is however qualified by the fact that the CROs hold microfilm and transcript copies of many registers not deposited, including those of several parishes no longer in the county.

## **Access to Records**

In some ways, the biggest difference between records in register offices and CROs lies less in the records themselves but than the means of access to them. Original records may not be inspected in register offices; instead, certified copies of individual entries must be requested by application form, at a charge of GBP 6.50 each. It is important to know when applying the place or district where a birth, marriage or death took place and the approximate date, generally within three years, as register entries for district or sub-districts can be very numerous. Indexes in the register office may however be examined at no charge by appointment, or searches made in electronic indexes (mainly for the Cambridge district) which are available over the Internet. Original or microfilm copies of registers may however be examined in CROs. The existence of though full modern transcripts of parish registers with surname indexes (some published and for sale as microfiche – see [www.cfhs.org.uk](http://www.cfhs.org.uk) or [www.huntsfhs.org.uk](http://www.huntsfhs.org.uk)) also provides an alternative means of research which is particular to a much smaller area than across a whole district and enables easier association of different kinds of record. Certified copies of original entries may be supplied if required or simple photocopies of registers or transcripts made where there is no risk of damage to documents.

Some subsidiary or derivative local registration records are also available in the CROs (mainly 20th-century birth returns and notice books for civil and nonconformist church marriages – details are in *Genealogical Sources in Cambridgeshire*, pp. 21-25). Additionally the General Register Office indexes of births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales 1837-1999 is available at CRO Cambridge. Besides its obvious value as a national index, this can be a useful tool for Cambridgeshire registration records even if the references themselves are meaningless to local register offices.

For those unable or not wishing to visit the CROs, Cambridgeshire Archives Service's Historical Research Service may prove a practical and economical way of accessing both series of records. Although Archives Service staff have no different access to records in register offices than members of the public they are familiar with the organisation of their colleagues' department and can carry out research on either resource mindful of the costs of the one avenue of enquiry as against the other.

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